Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen, eds., *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*

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The first thing to be said about this book is that its subtitle is a little misleading in its unspecified expansiveness; in fact, only English-language fiction features in this volume. Second, the generic expectations raised by the use of “crime fiction” are only partially satisfied, as, next to discussions of a number of works that indeed fit the popular formula marker usually associated with the genre, the volume also includes essays on such decidedly non-formula works by Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, Romesh Gunesekera, and Kazuo Ishiguro. To be fair, the editors of the volume immediately indicate as much in their introduction, when they stipulate that “ultimately, the ‘postmortem’ can also imply an examination of postcolonial literature which increasingly uses elements of crime fiction for ‘social’ rather than ‘criminal’ detection” (8). To explore the state of the postcolonial nation via the figure of the detective indeed seems to be the greatest common denominator for the material here presented.

As “alibi” for their use of the term “postmortem,” Matzke and Mühleisen invoke that “a dissection of a body to determine the cause of death, the ‘postmortem’ of the
postcolonial not only alludes to the investigation of the victim’s remains, but also to
the body of the individual text and its contexts, or the ‘corpus’ of crime fiction labeled
as ‘postcolonial’ ... from a historical point of view” (8). The ensuing essays take up one
or other of the possibilities just sketched. Stephen Knight, in “Crimes Domestic and
Crimes Colonial: The Role of Crime Fiction in Developing Postcolonial Consciousness,”
performs what his title promises upon both Australian and, to a lesser extent, Welsh
crime fiction. Wendy Knepper, in “Confession, Autopsy and the Postcolonial
Postmortems of Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost,” dissects how the novel in question, set
in Sri Lanka, “perform[s] postmortems in the forensic and figurative senses of the
word” (57). In “Sherlock Holmes – He Dead,” Tobias Döring gives an illuminating
reading of Kazuo Ishiguro’s When We Were Orphans as appropriating English Golden Age
detective conventions to show up the very cultural constructedness of the society this
set of conventions is usually taken to uphold. Significantly, this revelation comes about
through the novel’s postcolonial aspects. Suchitra Mathur unleashes a Bhabhaesque
mimicry analysis upon Satyajit Ray’s Feluda stories and concludes that “the
postcolonial transposition of Holmes to a land beyond western civilization does indeed
result in a kind of ‘death’ and reincarnation, not just of the detective, but of detective
fiction itself ” (108). With Katja Sarkowsky’s “Manga, Zen, and Samurai: Negotiating
Exoticism and Orientalist Images in Sujata Massey’s Rei Shimura Novels” we turn to
temporary American crime writing, and to how Massey over the course of her Rei
Shimura series adopts and modulates popular images and representation of Japanese
culture. Sarkowsky’s article is followed by a brief e-mail interview with Massey. Vera
Alexander examines how Shyam Selvadurai and Romesh Gunesekera, again in novels
set in Sri Lanka or its former colonial avatar Ceylon, “use crime motifs in questioning
naïve dichotomies of good and evil, in criticizing oppressive social orders and in
presenting borders as spaces of flexibility, insight, and innovation” (141). “Riddles in
the Sands of the Kalahari: Detectives at Work in Botswana,” by Elfi Bettinger, contrasts
Alexander McCall Smith’s immensely popular Precious Ramotswe series with Unity
Dow’s 2002 The Screaming of the Innocent, which is also concerned with ritual child
killing for purposes of witchcraft. Geoffrey V. Davis pays homage to a South African
author, Wessel Ebersohn, who, under Apartheid, used the detective genre to effectively
criticize the regime’s racial policies while not letting any doubt that he loved his
country. A. B. Christa Schwarz argues that the African American George Schuyler in his
1935–36 serialized novella, “The Ethiopian Murder Mystery,” transposed the colonial
war waged by Italy against the (then) last independent African nation, Ethiopia, into a
detective story set in Manhattan, and pitting two bands of spies against each other.
Xavier Pons conducts a devastating analysis of the popular Australian detective author
Robert G. Barrett’s Les Norton series, which he condemns as “fiction with narrow,
uncritical intellectual horizons” (252). Finally, Patricia Plummer argues that Mike
Phillips in his Sam Deane novels “writes his very own version of British hard-boiled
fiction, reinventing the genre as transcultural detective fiction” (258), in this particular
case starring a black Caribbean-born North-London “journalist-cum-investigator”
(261). An interview between Plummer and Phillips concludes the volume.

All in all, this is a valuable addition to both crime fiction and postcolonial studies, even
though the volume is mainly the results of a 2004 conference, amplified with a few
more contributions. There is little theory in this volume but the analyses of the
primary texts are invariably worthwhile and occasionally even stimulating. Let us hope
that this volume will whet the appetite for further work on postcolonial crime fiction.
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Theo D’Haen is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Leuven (Louvain) in Belgium. He has published widely on modern literature in European languages, mainly with respect to (post)modernism, (post)colonialism, and crime writing. Recent book-length publications in English include: Contemporary American Crime Writing (2001), Configuring Romanticism (2003), How Far is America From Here? (2005), and Cultural Identity and Postmodern Writing (2006). He is editor-in-chief of the European Review, the official organ of the Academia Europaea, for which he is Chair of its Literary and Theatrical Studies Section.